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# Reconsideration of Moral Education and Ecological Imagination in Early Childhood: Focusing on Awareness of Relational Self in Daily Life

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*In his chapter, "Ecological Imagination and Aims of Moral Education Through the Kyoto School and American Pragmatism," in Education and the Kyoto School of Philosophy (2012), Steven Fesmire argues that "ecological imagination" can be a contact point between the Kyoto school of philosophy and pragmatism. The purpose of this paper is to reconsider moral education in early childhood from the perspective of "ecological imagination." In order to achieve this purpose, I shall re-examine a concrete practice of early childhood education, focusing on the Japanese expression, 'itadakimasu' (a phrase to be used as a moral custom before a meal). I shall discuss that ecological imagination deepens awareness of relational self and it changes the perspective of a routine activity. Based upon my reflection on practice, I shall try to clarify how educational opportunities for cultivating moral behaviours of children are already and always embedded in their daily practice: and that "ecological imagination" is indispensable for teachers to be aware of and make best use of those opportunities. Teachers should respect other lives which are not noticed but connected to our daily life to exercise ecological imagination and moral deliberation. Taking responsibility for relational life promotes moral education and education for sustainable development.*

## INTRODUCTION

We are living in a difficult ecological situation. We must settle many problems to keep our environment and life sustainable, for example climate change, loss of biodiversity, nuclear proliferation, and food and water deficits. Recognizing the importance of education to realize a sustainable world, UNESCO initiated the "Decade of Education for Sustainable Development". In this program, education is defined based on values of respect; respect for others, including present and future generations, for difference and diversity, for the environment, for the resources of the planet we inhabit (UNESCO, 2006). We can share these values of respect as a basis of existence and responsibility to future generations.

People need imagination to have these values because these objects of respect are not always at hand; rather, we are often distanced from them. Fesmire, borrowing Dewey's phrase, argues that imaginative reflection brings clear insight into remote, absent and obscure issues (Fesmire, 2012, p. 120). Imagination makes us aware of the inseparable relationships between the self and the environment, or the present, past and future. Fesmire's proposal of ecological imagination is highly suggestive as a philosophical work connecting two relational thoughts, the Kyoto School and American Pragmatism, and as a practical application of the concept to moral education.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest how a teacher should cultivate ecological imagination

of children. I shall also clarify that a teacher needs to cultivate his own ecological imagination. Through re-examining an episode of my own educational practice, I shall explain how a teacher's imagination could work both for deepening the awareness of the situation and for cultivating children's ecological imagination.

## ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND MORAL EDUCATION

First of all, we shall clarify Fesmire's concept of ecological imagination in order to reconsider the concrete educational practice. Fesmire describes ecological imagination as the intersection of the Kyoto School and American Pragmatism. According to him, both traditions have characteristic that avoids fallacies of reification, privileging agent over situation (p. 111). Pragmatism considered that the terms of things, such as 'frog', 'pond', or 'tree', signify not only an object but also an organized integration of complex events. William James tried to express this issue by the concept of 'pure experience' which means people's radical and direct relationship with the world. The Kyoto School of philosophy, as represented in Nishida's concept of 'field of nothingness', has developed under the influence of James' thought and the Buddhist idea of 'engi'. It reflects relational thinking which is contrary to the Platonist idea of form. Basho's *haiku*, *Furu ike ya/kawazu tobikomu/mizu no oto* [Old pond/a frog jumps into/the sound of water], illustrates Nishida's point well (Basho in Fesmire, 2012, p. 112). This haiku describes an old pond just as event, so that the silence of this Haiku forms 'sound of soundless', without 'plop!' of the frog. The self and events cannot be broken into subject and object. This relational thinking overcomes the Western-style monistic extra-relation substratum and makes a path to ecological wisdom.

In this tradition, 'I' emerges as a 'locus of activity', not regarded as an antecedently existing entity (Fesmire, 2012, p. 113). The life world comes in a mosaic of directly experienced worlds. However, the self does not completely depend on the situation. We should not overlook that awareness of horizons which brings a more meaningful, value-rich, and responsive life. Awareness is achieved in permanent creation, which Nishida describes as 'active intuition' that includes aesthetic perception and moral requirement (Nishida, 1937). It follows that moral life has not been guided from transcendental principles but ought to be found in the bottom of the self, as "transcendence down" (Standish, 2012). As Watsuji clearly mentioned, 'the locus of ethical problems lies not in the consciousness of the isolated individual, but precisely in the in-betweenness of person and person' (Watsuji in Fesmire, 2012, p. 115). Moral behaviour is called from the deep inside of the relational self.<sup>2</sup>

From this point of view, Fesmire insists that 'imagination is essential to the emergence of meaning, a necessary condition for which is to note relationships between things' (Fesmire, 2012, p. 119). Imagination, as Dewey also claimed, is the only path to notice actual relational conditions in light of what is possible (Dewey in Fesmire, 2012, p. 119). We rarely notice that the one dollar hamburger and coffee, that I have, is made up of deforestation for the sake of ranches and low paid labour of coffee farmers in developing countries. The meaning of things is grasped and amplified by imagination which crystallizes the possibilities of the present condition for thinking and acting.

Viewed in this light, ecological imagination can be regarded as a vital power source to deepen awareness, discovering the self in a relational network. Moralistic choices of humans are

themselves parts of transactional fields of complex relationships and events. Therefore, we often fail to perceive and respond to the problems hidden in our condition. Ecological imagination, which brings insight, feeling and new meaning into the present situation, confers significance upon otherwise mechanical and superficial experience, and it opens the redirection of moral action (Fesmire, 2012, p. 121). The self is directed to further achievements if ecological imagination works, and we can get aware of more remote and closely related things with us.

Fesmire argues that an aim of moral education is cultivating ecological imagination both to help youths deal intelligently with global scene and to help them become aesthetically reconnected with natural and social relationships (p. 127). Morality is continually deepened through awareness, as the Kyoto School philosophy insists, and that redirects action and perception, as Pragmatism highlights. Cultivating ecological imagination promotes these cycles of growth.

## THE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE OF “ITADAKIMASU”

Fesmire fruitfully discusses about educational practice from the perspective of comparative philosophy. What I must consider next is how ecological imagination works in educational practice and how a teacher should cultivate ecological imagination. Although Fesmire also tries to offer a test case of moral education at the last part of his paper, it is not enough to demonstrate the consistency of his argument that ecological imagination is ‘a practical tool’ which embodies Kyoto Philosophy’s idea of awareness and Pragmatism’s of action. I shall respond to his discussion from the standpoint of a teacher.

I will describe below my own educational experience as a preschool teacher. This was the event when I prepared for lunch with about 30 children who were 3 years old to 6 years old. I used to make short records of my educational practice everyday. This event was so impressive for me that I put it down more precisely than usual. This experience had important meaning for me and changed my educational practice after that day.

Before I start to consider the case, I shall explain the cultural background of the phrase ‘*itadakimasu*’ in this episode. It is a common custom to say “Itadakimasu.” before a meal in Japan. To say this phrase is an important way of showing appreciation for the meal. It has several meanings, to eat, to be given, and to hold up high, with respectful nuances, though people are rarely conscious of the original meaning when they say it.

Episode, 11 December 2010

Some children had sat at tables to have snacks, vegetables on this day. I was waiting for late children in order to say “Itadakimasu.” together. While we were waiting, the children who were waiting for a long time got impatient and noisy. All children had come after a few minutes, and I said to children who had waited, “Thank you for waiting”, and to all, “Let’s have a snack. Please hold the palms and fingers together and say “Itadakimasu.”” Then the children shouted the phrase as if they vented their anger. Though I understood this was because of the stress of waiting, their attitudes seemed inappropriate for eating. Promptly I asked them “Please wait. To whom did you say “Itadakimasu.”?” They looked surprised, because I had never asked the children a question after it, and they started to consider the answer. A boy answered,

to his embarrassment, “I said it to our mothers (who prepared the snacks).” Then I said, “That may be right. But I think it is also important to say it to vegetables because it means eating the other life. These vegetables were grown in a farm and came here now. I think we should appreciate the vegetables.” Then children got calm and stared at the vegetables for a moment. I felt that the children understood the reason why I interrupted their eating.

## HOW DOES A TEACHER’S ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION WORK?

I could choose to say nothing in this case because it was good enough that they could wait for late children for a few minutes (waiting for others was an important virtue in this preschool). But I could not fail to tell them that they should reconsider the meaning of ‘*itadakimasu*’. To tell the truth, I do not know why I chose to interrupt them at that moment; I just felt there was something wrong in the situation. When I made a note of this event after the class, I came to understand what I had felt; that became they seemed to be lacking respect for lives. Through the reflection on this event, I convinced that my behaviour had implications for the role of a teacher.

The point I want to make here is not to prove this is the model case of a good moral education, but to make clear how the ecological imagination of the children and myself works in this episode. One hypothesis is that ‘the speech act’ of ‘*itadakimasu*’ inspired ecological imagination in this situation. Saying it, in its original meaning, is to show appreciation or respect for everything which makes a meal possible, for example cooks, rice, and people who raised the rice, though people often forget this in its routine. It is not only the sign that they start to eat but also shows appreciation or respect for a meal. This is ‘the speech act’; the action that the sentence describes is performed by utterance of the sentence itself (Austin, 1955). When I said it and the children repeated it loudly, their way of speaking conflicted with the original meaning of it as a speech act, which essentially requires respect, and this brought the bad feeling to me.

Restrictedly speaking, feeling bad and interrupting children are not sequential. I need to decide how to deal with the feeling. When I felt bad I was facing the question, what should I do as a teacher? I was ‘the locus of an ethical problem’. If my feeling was coming from my stress of caring for children, I should not scold them, but if from something immoral, I should stop them. At this time, to explain in retrospect, my ecological imagination realizes the meaning of the situation and lets me decide to interrupt them. I noticed that the situation includes other lives, vegetables, not only the children and myself. “*Itadaku*” means both to have and to be given; to have a meal (*syokuji-wo-itadaku*) means to be given other lives. Saying “*Itadakimasu*,” in front of the vegetables, reminds me of these remote but closely related lives. As Fesmire argues, ecological imagination makes meaning of the situation and enables moral deliberation in a relational context (Fesmire, 2012, p. 122). “*Itadakimasu*,” in this episode, inspired ecological imagination and moral deliberation. As Nishida say, I encounter the others at the bottom of the self and that requires infinite morality (Nishida, 1939). The more awareness of relational self deepens, the more moral requirement heightens. I felt that the situation was immoral because I noticed that *we* were about to eat vegetables’ lives without gratitude.

Although I felt there was something *wrong* in this situation, consequently, I restrained the

impulse to scold them because what they did was not out of malice, rather, almost all people, even adults, teachers and myself, tend to forget the feeling of appreciation when saying it in daily life. Considering what to do, I came up with the idea that the children were innocent but the situation was immoral. This changed the question to “how should I make the children aware of the situation without scolding?” Then I chose to say “To whom did you say it?”

## HOW DOES CHILDREN'S ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION WORK?

Children stopped eating and chattering after my question and they started to think to whom they said “Itadakimasu,” and one boy answered that “I said it to mothers.” I thought this answer was good because they earnestly thought about my question. Nevertheless, his answer was still far from my experience of the situation, this means we might not share the meaning of situation. I thought he did not understand why they were interrupted because his answer was too logical. It sounded like an excuse, and his embarrassed expression showed that he did not feel appreciation in reality. Although I cannot substantiate whether their ecological imagination worked at this moment, I felt the atmosphere of the classroom had clearly changed after I said “I think it is important to say “Itadakimasu.” to vegetables.” The children got calm and stared at the vegetables. It might be that my suggestion made his ecological imagination extended beyond their surroundings, which could be logically recognized, to remote relationships, which could be felt as the life network. I can say, at least, the children were able to notice that their actual condition was related to various actors, such as mothers, farmers and other lives. If awareness of these relationships gets deeper through their use of their ecological imagination, the children have more opportunities to think and feel connection to other lives in their daily life. Unless a teacher imagines ecological meanings of a situation and makes effort to share this awareness, children cannot enlarge their own imagination. They can find new meanings of daily life in a more related and moralistic sense.

## HOW SHOULD A TEACHER CULTIVATE ECOLOGICAL IMAGINATION?

So far, we have considered how the ecological imagination of the children and myself worked in this episode. We need to conclude by considering how a teacher should cultivate ecological imagination, as a consequence of my reflection on my practice. First, a teacher should cultivate his own ecological imagination because he needs to find opportunities to cultivate children's ecological imagination in daily life. Educational opportunity is in daily life, but a teacher needs to deepen awareness to realize it. Using his ecological imagination, a teacher becomes aware of the horizon of the self and relationships with remote things and other lives. If he shares this experience with children, they can find new meanings of situation and develop their own ecological imagination. Reconsidering meanings of traditional events or cultural customs, like saying “Itadakimasu,” may help a teacher to cultivate ecological imagination, because these customs often preserve the ecological wisdom that observes remote relationships in routine activities. Secondly, a teacher needs to judge what is immoral carefully. A teacher has to judge the situation and decide his action in a split second, particularly praise, scolding or asking a question, under a condition which has moral problems. Although ecological imagination deepens awareness of a relational self and enable a teacher to see something immoral, the subject

who judges what is moral or immoral is individual, not only a teacher but also children. What a teacher shares with children, after his moral deliberation, is not a value judgment but experience of the situation. Both a teacher and a child have his or her own moral responsibility in the situation. Moral decision is fallible, there is no absolute reference point, and needs inquiry. One of the aims of moral education is, as Fesmire says, to help children to be patient with the suspense of moral inquiry and aware of fallibility and incompleteness of any moral deliberation (Fesmire, 2012, p. 126). Then, teachers also should be patient and conscious of fallibility in themselves. Finally, a teacher needs respect for lives. As the phrase 'itadakimasu' shows, our lives are not sustainable without other lives. Respect for other lives gives us more imagination of what composes our existence. Also, respect for lives broadens imagination to future generations, reminding us that we are related not only to the past but also to the future. Respect for lives is an important condition for exercising ecological imagination and moral deliberation for sustainability of the self and the world.

## NOTES

1. 'Engi' is a core Buddhist idea of dependent co-origination which reflects the doctrine that form and emptiness are identical.
2. Nishida explains that the personal awareness of the infinite 'should' develops from the world of infinite historical form making. The world of historical actuality forms as the mutual determination of singularity and singularity. Our personal self awareness develops at the bottom of the self where I encounter thou (Nishida, 1939, p. 277). In addition, the direction where I should go is shown by mediation of the absolute. 'The Actuality is always mediated by the absolutely transcendental; it is from the absolute that we cannot even speak of confronting that we are shown the place of frontier.' (p. 288) In this sense, moral behaviour is *called* as the infinite responsibility.

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